

## MARXISM, MORALISM, AND MASS CULTURE

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In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels offer one of their most negative assessments of life under capitalism when they say,

Just as, to the bourgeois, the disappearance of class property is the disappearance of production itself, so the disappearance of class culture is to him identical with the disappearance of all culture. That culture, the loss of which he laments, is, for the enormous majority, a mere training to act as a machine.<sup>1</sup>

Today many Marxists apply the same verdict to contemporary culture. But significantly, little attention is paid to bourgeois high culture. After all, the masses of people are much more likely to be paying attention to the Muppets than Goethe's *Faust*, to the Rolling Stones than a Beethoven symphony, to a gigantic animal attacking a city than a Wagner opera, to the Super Bowl or World Cup soccer match than a

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<sup>1</sup>M&E Manifesto add disc of "Kultur"

*Change*

Henry James or James Joyce novel. Today mass culture is often examined by Marxists as "a mere training to act as a machine," that is, as one of the most powerful and effective sources and transmitters of the values and world view of the capitalist class.

Here I want to offer a broad survey of different positions on mass culture that have developed within or in relation to a Marxist framework.<sup>2</sup> I think the traditional left analysis is deeply flawed because it begins with a moralistic condemnation of mass culture rather than a scientific examination of the phenomenon and because it posits a passive audience which simply and uncritically receives the culture industry's output. Recent theoretical and practical work by Marxists on the nature of culture, consciousness, ideology, and entertainment provides the basis for a better understanding of mass culture's operation and political potential.

### High Culture Norms and Content Analysis

Marx and Engels showed their awareness of the new mass culture generated in their own time in one of their first collaborative works, *The Holy Family*, which included a discussion of the immensely popular serialized novel, *The Mysteries of Paris* by Eugene Sue. As an analysis, the consideration is rather limited because Marx and Engels use the novel in a polemic against their philosophical opponents. Sue's

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<sup>2</sup>fn Aronowitz article, others (see biblio)

novel, which describes the miseries of the Parisian poor, presents at best a sentimental socialism. Its politics can be summed up by repeating the earnest complaint of one character, who cries out in his painful poverty, "Oh, if only the rich knew of it!" Marx and Engels had no problem in ridiculing the book as well as their opponents who had praised it as an immortal work of art. Marx and Engels concluded that Sue's novel was "the most wretched offal of socialist literature."<sup>3</sup>

Aside from this very negative evaluation of an international best seller, Marx and Engels did not leave any extensive analysis of popular culture. Too involved to write all of the things they planned, all they left us is the promise that Marx wanted, after finishing *Capital*, to do a full length study of Balzac. While admitting that the French writer was a royalist, Marx believed Balzac saw more deeply into the social and political contradictions of his time than any of his contemporaries. Had Marx done that study he would have had to come to terms with the novelist's early years as a hack writer of wildly uneven potboilers (such as *Argow the Pirate*) as well as with the mature works full of irony and social criticism. But we do not have Marx's book on Balzac as the commercial artist in the capitalist world, and in its absence Marxist thought about mass culture has been formed in the shadow of Marx and Engels' thoughts on high culture. Marx was a man of his time, and his taste in art throughout his career remained essentially

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<sup>3</sup>In Marx and Engels on Literature and Art: A Selection of Writings, tr. and ed. Lee Bazandall and Stefan Morowski (St. Louis/Milwaukee: Telos Press, 1973), p. 119.

that of the educated German middle class of his day, which is to say aesthetic standard defined by the western tradition of masterpieces from the Greeks to the Romantic period. (Remember that Marx was a precocious teenager when Goethe completed his *Faust*!) With this background we should not be surprised to find that for a long time—well to the end of the Second International with the start of World War 1—Marxism takes this great tradition in music, the visual arts, and literature as the best, as the model for achievement, subsumed under the label of a very broadly construed realism. Thus we find Rosa Luxemburg praising the conventional masterpieces, Trotsky holding to received opinion about the achievements of bourgeois art, Lenin preferring the 19th century Romantic poet Pushkin to the Bolshevik experimentalist Mayakovsky, and literary critic George Lukacs finding Thomas Mann the greatest 20th century writer.

But this very adherence to a specific tradition, interpreted with specific values, does not leave much room for understanding and interpreting the newer mass arts and media such as advanced technology printed matter, photography, motion pictures, radio, phonograph, tape recorder, and television. While some socialists saw the use of this new technology as full of potential, and while in the 1920s in the Soviet Union there was an enormous burst of creative activity in industrial arts, particularly in filmmaking, the basic tendency on the left, especially in the west, was to see "art" as those forms which were traditionally accepted. The new media were useful for agitation and propaganda—direct political work—but "culture"

continued to be judged as the high culture orthodoxy. And the field of Marxist cultural criticism was further restricted by being always dominated by literary intellectuals who had little experience in visual arts, music, performance arts, or communication theory.

Usually Marxists saw mass culture only in terms of its particular commercial exploitation in the advanced capitalist nations. The analytic model many Marxists used to understand mass culture rested on a narrow understanding of ideology in which mass culture appeared as the fairly direct and deliberate propagation of false ideas from a coherent ruling class, using a group of skilled technical intermediaries, to a passive mass audience. While I believe that this model is disasterously simplistic, I would acknowledge that it does fit some aspects of mass communications. Most obviously it applies to the advertising industry and to government sponsored information. Also, it cannot be denied that control by ownership does exist, as in the domination of Hollywood by eastern finance capital in the 1930s or multinational conglomerate control of U.S. commercial tv today. Even when this control by ownership is not openly exercised, it remains a potential which can be directly used if nondirection leads to conflict with the interests of the owners. But it must be clear that capitalists own media industries primarily to make money, not to disseminate particular ideas that will favor the capitalist class.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Guback, Schiller, Smythe, etc.

*European state monopoly - etc.*

Marxists who study communication from a concern with ownership, control, and manipulation often posit a totally passive mass audience. Much of this investigation produces a materialist documentation which is fundamental for further theoretical development. For example, research into the industrial, technological, financial, legal, and business history of Hollywood underpins an understanding of production in the fullest sense. Yet a complete understanding of production must be conceptually balanced by an understanding of reception as well. Without a sophisticated understanding of the audience and its ability to change and discount material, analysts tend to fall back on the model of a passive audience which simply absorbs whatever ideas are put forth by the system. The knowledge that capitalists own, direct, and manage media industries tends to produce the assumption that they must therefore use that power in a conscious way to engineer consumption and consent. At its worst this kind of radical analysis descends into barely concealed conspiracy theories. An unfortunate example crops up in Armand Mattelart's otherwise substantial *Multinational Corporations and the Control of Culture* when the author repeats a press release inferring that *Ms.* magazine (owned at that time by Warner Communications) is controlled by the CIA.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> document. This press release, from a tiny sect in the Women's Movement, criticizing *Ms.* editor Gloria Steinem, is reported by Mattelart as if it represented a general or widely accepted position among U.S. feminists. Neither Steinem, who for many years has made clear her general political orientation as a left liberal Democrat, nor *Ms.*, which has a similar general position at best, is discredited in the feminist community, though socialist feminists and radical cultural feminists often complain about its ideological and political limitations.

*see Wallis in 60s*

left and the feminist movements are ill-served by such speculation. The fact that the state does at times directly and secretly intervene in the media should not divert attention from the way the mass media operate *institutionally* to perpetuate the dominant form of social relations. Mattelart demonstrates the immense power of a few transnational corporations operating in the related areas of electronics, aerospace, publishing, audio-visual hardware and software, television, film, the press, and advertising. No one could dispute the fact of capitalist ownership, but what remains questionable is the equation of ownership with precise and continuous control over the product, and a predictable consumer response.

Consider the assumption of direct and unmediated control of consciousness in the opening of Herbert Schiller's *The Mind Managers* "America's media managers create, process, refine, and preside over the circulation of images and information which determine our beliefs and attitudes and, ultimately, our behavior." Though he carefully develops the idea that he is describing a system, not a conspiracy, Schiller's basic vocabulary of "manipulation" and "conditioning" assumes the mass audience is a puppet. Concentrating on the state/corporate apparatus and the dissemination of information, without equal attention to how communication is received, particularly in fictional entertainment forms, Schiller forgets that control must be matched by public confidence in and acceptance of those media for them to function. In an open dictatorship, the oppressed do not believe the official newspaper and television. In a capitalist democracy, there are

significant differences among various political and social groups which emerge in the media in ways that reveal contradiction and diversity. No doubt advertisers and politicians would like to directly manipulate mass consciousness. No doubt they spend time and money attempting to change thought and behavior. But it is also clear that they are not able to do so in a direct and predictable way. Those cases where total mobilization of communication for social control took place, such as Nazi Germany, also reveal that all the rest of social, political, and economic life was regimented. In such a context propaganda is one factor among many others shaping consciousness. Similarly, however much "selling of the President" takes place in American electoral politics, however much specific politicians can capitalize on certain media situations, however appropriate it may seem that a movie star becomes President in mass culture America, the outcome is not predictable and the system is not totally rational.

By concentrating on the fact of and potential for control in ownership, management, and regulation, such radical communication studies refute the established consensus that the entire apparatus is neutral and media decision makers simply respond to events rather than help create them, shape them, and interpret them. The left has been most successful at demonstrating direct and indirect media control and distortion in news and information where it is possible to refer to facts, missing information, and alternative interpretations. But the left has been far less successful in understanding how such control functions in



entertainment, which furnishes the bulk of broadcasting and even the U.S. press.

The most ambitious recent attempt to account for the mass communications industries from a Marxist perspective comes from Dallas Smythe who argues that the mass media sector is the keystone of contemporary capitalism.

To summarize: The mass media institutions in monopoly capitalism developed the equipment, workers, and organization to produce audiences for the purposes of the system between about 1875 and 1950. The prime purpose of the mass media complex is to produce people in audiences who work at learning the theory and practice of consumership for civilian goods and who support (with taxes and votes) the military demand management system. The second principal purpose is to produce audiences whose theory and practice confirms the ideology of monopoly capitalism (possessive individualism in an authoritarian political system). The third principal purpose is to produce public opinion supportive of the strategic and tactical policies of the state (e.g., presidential candidates, support of Indochinese military adventures, space race, detente with the Soviet Union, rapprochement with China and ethnic and youth dissent). Necessarily in the monopoly capitalist system, the fourth purpose of the mass media complex is to operate itself so profitably as to ensure unrivalled respect

for its economic importance in the system. It has been quite successful in achieving all four purposes.<sup>6</sup>

By collapsing some traditional distinctions in Marxist economics, principally those between production and reproduction, and between base and superstructure, Smythe argues that in monopoly capitalism, "the mass media produce audiences and sell them to advertisers....These audiences work to market these things to themselves."<sup>7</sup> Off the job, the largest single portion of people's time is spent "working" at attending to the media which offer a "free lunch" of entertainment and information. The audience is a commodity.

Smythe's economic macro analysis corrects some mistakes in previous Marxist media study. Most importantly, he stresses that commercial radio and television, magazines, and newspapers exist economically to deliver audiences to advertisers. However his model cannot account for movies, popular music, subscriber cable tv, video rental, books, and the European example of state operated noncommercial broadcasting. Without an adequate theory of consciousness and ideology, Smythe backs into peculiar positions. At the same time as claiming there is no significant distinction between production and consumption, he argues, along with a number of male theorists who seem totally ignorant of feminist thought in the past twenty years, that the family is a haven in a media-dominated capitalist world. This claim assumes that

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<sup>6</sup>smythe

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somehow the place where most media is consumed is untouched by its otherwise all-pervasive influence, and Smythe completely ignores women's physical and emotional labor within the family.

After demonstrating ownership of the media by capitalists, this type of Marxist analysis proceeds to detail specific false ideas transmitted to the mass public. At its best, this particular approach is very similar to the common "content analysis" practiced by non-Marxist sociologists and analysts of mass communications.<sup>8</sup> Basically this method attempts to record the most obvious or literal meaning using established categories to note statistical frequency and repetition. The method's underlying assumption is that the overt meaning is received pretty much as it is presented (or perhaps, pretty much as the analyst sees it). While in unskilled hands this approach often seems banal, it has the distinct virtue of sticking closely to the most evident level of meaning. For many researchers, the level of manifest content seems to mark what most mass culture means to most people most of the time.

Mainstream U.S. social scientists' analysis of violence on television provides a well known example of this approach. In studying representations of violence such researchers often simply compile statistics by counting violent incidents. Yet this kind of study can collapse the dramatic shootout of a cop show with the animated

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<sup>8</sup>Gerbner

cartoon violence of the Roadrunner and Coyote. It remains unable to distinguish even within a dramatic narration between a long slow agonizing torture that ends in death and an instant murder or between a physical assault shot from the perpetrator's point of view and one shot from the victim's perspective. When concerned with the effects of viewing, such research tries to document immediate behavior change (often by observing children) or post-viewing attitudes and opinions. Such investigation, however, often leads to an analysis which makes sweeping generalizations. George Gerbner and Larry Gross, for example, find television a "chief instrument of social control" and fault it for, among other things, not matching the narrative standards of the college educated strata:

Unlike the real world, where personalities are complex, motives unclear, and outcomes ambiguous, television presents a world of clarity and simplicity in show after show, rewards and punishments follow quickly and logically. Crises are resolved, problems are solved, and justice, or at least authority, always triumphs.<sup>9</sup>

That ambiguous outcomes might be more satisfying to the petty bourgeoisie whose class genius is precisely to waver rather than to workers whose daily experience is marked by clearly delineated rules and expectations, is not considered in such analysis.<sup>10</sup> Actually, people at the bottom can have a very clear understanding of motives and

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<sup>9</sup>check against original

<sup>10</sup>I discuss this in "Working Class Heroes."

personalities by virtue of their class position. The hard clarity of slave narratives, such as *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass* provides ample testimony to that fact. But Gerbner and Gross see no forms of resistance possible.

Throughout history, once a ruling class has established its rule, the primary function of its cultural media has been the legitimization and maintenance of its authority. Folk tales and other traditional dramatic stories have always reinforced established authority, teaching that when society's rules are broken retribution is visited upon the violators. The importance of the existing social order is always explicit in such stories.<sup>11</sup>

Yet this is actually not true of much folklore, particularly in the oral tradition of oppressed groups. Comic stories often ridicule established authority and seem to show that breaking society's rules is a lot of fun. The re-establishment of order in narratives at the end can be taken with a broad wink. And a critique of the existing social order is present in all literature and art with a utopian or dystopian dimension.

In the hands of Marxists similar mass culture analyses often become the stereotype of crude left criticism. The lyrics of popular music, for example, are analyzed on a totally literal level and measured against an abstract dogma and found politically incorrect. What all such

analyses usually miss is any level of complexity introduced by narrative technique and development, any metaphorical or symbolic meaning (unless heavily underlined by the creator), any sophistication such as irony, and almost all humor. Usually form is discarded in such an enterprise, though it can be subjected to a simple analysis too by focussing on the undeniably formulaic nature of mass culture entertainment.

Most of all, such analyses, be they by Marxists or not, miss the actual use, the social reception, the anthropological level of understanding the material at hand. For example, rock music did not speak of rebellion in the late 60s only when the Jefferson Airplane sang, "tear down the walls, motherfuckers," or Mick Jagger proclaimed he was a "Street Fighting Man." The music itself, apart from the lyrics was rebellious and celebratory and understood as such by its primary youth audience. Which is not to deny the cooptation of musical groups. But pointing out that many members of successful rock groups are rich or arguing that their lyrics do not amount to a realistic political program misses the point of how the music was and is used and understood by its audience. Late 60s rock music expressed a complex of emotional experiences within the political and countercultural movement of the time. It ordered and articulated them, which is, after all, one of the most fundamental functions of art in all societies. In the context of the times, rock music embodied the contradictions of its makers and its audience. Thus it could express both a progressive demand for nonrepressive sexuality and a regressive sexism and exploitation of

women. Unless we grasp both aspects of such a contradiction, we cannot formulate an adequate understanding of it.

The Marxist content-based approach also tends to significantly distort those topics it does examine most sympathetically. Thus the Black blues and Appalachian ballad traditions are examined with a special privilege given to work, protest, and topical songs. The overwhelming statistical preponderance of love songs is ignored or the lyrics are put aside as privatistic and individualistic. And the organic relationship of blues and ballads to gospel and hymns is repressed.<sup>12</sup>

The narrow focus on content can be reassuring--and not only to Marxists--because it is so simple: it allows the analyst to focus on an easily identifiable portion of a cultural production, to remove it from a larger context, to measure it against a predetermined standard, and even to suggest politically correct changes. Used as a political tactic it has been most successful when used by organized pressure groups in conjunction with tv network internal censorship departments. It assumes that a "negative image" can be easily replaced with a "positive image" without considering the nature of images and how they are understood.<sup>13</sup> It lends itself to a narrow, even self-interested, ethnocentrism with little reflection on what is "negative" and "positive" for different groups and why. And it is seldom able to handle the interrelation of class, race, gender, and other factors very well. For

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<sup>12</sup>see biblio essay on blues, appendix

<sup>13</sup>pos image in JC anthol

instance, we can ask exactly what changed when primary school texts added Black figures to the suburban station wagon lifestyle of Dick and Jane's family with active little boys and passive little girls.

### The Politics of Designer Jeans

*or part of ref to Haug,  
Fiske, Eccles.*

Content analysis often produces an easy moralism in which the analyst's personal taste matches the political evaluation of the work ("I liked it; therefore, it's politically correct.") This lazy moralism is one of the most persistent problems in left cultural understanding. Once I was filming the May Day parade and rally of an old left communist group (Progressive Labor Party) and heard the final speaker give examples of undeniable "capitalist decadence" which would disappear under socialism: Big Macs, designer jeans, and disco music. Slight problem: many of the young people present were wearing designer jeans (though probably K-Mart imitations), and a number of them had brought along radio-tape players and played disco-soul stations or tapes during the picnic which followed. Oh yes, the box lunch included such junk food staples as pop and potato chips. Capitalist decadence? Minimally the remarks seem thoughtless, ignorant, and possibly arrogant. The rhetorical implication was that "everyone agrees" that fast foods, cotton denim pants with fancy stitching on the back, and a certain commercial form of Black music are bad. Yet the actions of a fair number of people present defied this assumption. But then, it's not unusual to see such evidence of how old



left leaders are out of touch with their membership, not to mention their constituencies.

A more pertinent and political way to think about this might be to ask, what is the actual social nature of fast food for the American working class today? Whatever the deficiencies in nutrition and cuisine, it must be granted that MacDonald's has a lot of pragmatic considerations going for it: convenient locations with free parking, fast service, low cost, clean atmosphere, fresh and familiar food, welcoming acceptance of children, and total predictability. In thinking about such a phenomenon it is important to understand what material, social, and psychological needs this business fulfills that makes working class people choose it. Rather than starting with the assumption that working class consumers are dupes, we might begin by asking if, given the available options, people are not making an understandable choice.

Similarly, adolescents in our culture typically have freedom of choice only in a few areas such as clothing, hairstyle, food away from home, music and other inexpensive recreations. (And these "rights" often are won through a painful-for-all-concerned negotiation and testing.) In this context, what is the social nature of designer jeans for working class youth? How do they fit the dialectic of conformity and individuality in the process of ascension to adulthood?

Marx remarked that wine for the French worker and beer for the German one were not arbitrary beverages but rather part of the

material necessities of each culture, part of the web of daily life.<sup>14</sup> Certainly it can be argued that since World War 2, jeans are an integral part of American working class culture, as custom, as style, as commodity, and as cultural sign. Initially a form of upper class downward mobility, designer jeans are appropriated by working class people not so much as a status symbol, a sign of upward mobility, but rather as a marker of working class aspiration, of resistance to having to settle for the cheapest, the plainest.<sup>15</sup>

Today a young Black working class woman cannot aspire to a house in the suburbs, not even expect ownership of a new car in the near future, but she can aspire to an expensive blouse or sweater, or fashionable jeans. For such a woman with an office job, to put her available capital on her back is an investment in some slight job mobility. And looking stylish on a limited budget can be a prided working class and lower middle class skill. (Which is matched, on the domestic side, with cooking tasty and ample food on a low budget in the style of *Family Circle*.) Thus to see the purchase and wearing of designer jeans as simply "false consciousness" is to miss the complex usage of the object as a cultural sign and as a form of resistance to the capitalist class's degrading and demeaning of working class life.

[insert here: discussion of jeans: (a) Ewen analysis. (b) Nicaragua]  
jeans ads: Micki McGee and John Ramiriez. Haug

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<sup>14</sup>insert reference

<sup>15</sup>ref Pink Glass Swan

In analyzing mass culture, we must consider the commodity itself and also its circulation and context. Consider an example from popular music. In the late 70s a style and fashion of music called disco rapidly developed, becoming best known through the success of the film **Saturday Night Fever**. At that time in Chicago an abrasive and somewhat demagogic disk jockey, Steve Dahl, began an anti-disco campaign on his heavy metal hard rock FM station. The station's core audience consisted of white ethnic urban working class young people, and Dahl's denunciation of disco played to these demographics and prejudices. Dahl's slogan, "Disco sucks,"<sup>16</sup> combined the sexist ideology that performing fellatio is a degrading activity with rejection of predominantly Black produced and listened to disco and latin salsa.<sup>17</sup> The slogan functioned as a fairly conscious euphemism for "white power" in Chicago schools, and T-shirts with the station's logo were worn by white teens as signs of racial separation, even pride. Explosive stuff, and it was no accident that following the DJ's much heralded public burning of disco records at a White Sox baseball game, an action celebrated in the social democrat newspaper, *In These*

<sup>16</sup>"Sucks" was not one of the "forbidden" words in broadcasting and since the 70s the word has passed into a more general usage of referring to unpleasantness without the original reference to cocksucking. *at least for a younger audience*

<sup>17</sup>Disco was also very popular in parts of urban gay male culture. In contrast to heavy metal, which is almost exclusively a male performer phenomenon with aggressively sexual and often violent lyrics and live performances in touring concerts, disco was overwhelmingly produced as a studio phenomenon with many women singers and mixed groups, and "performed" from records in dance clubs.

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*Times* that gangs of Dahl's fans beat up Blacks who lived in the vicinity of the ball park (not mentioned by *ITT*). In such a context, disco can be seen as not merely a certain kind of Black commercial music, but also a cultural sign loaded with political significance, especially around race and class issues.

### Mass Culture and Mass "Man"

Because mass culture is always a complex and contradictory phenomenon in its reception and use by people, it is mechanical and reductionist to simply dismiss the phenomenon as another example of "capitalist decadence." Yet it is common to find Marxist writers on art doing just that. For example, in his book on Marxist aesthetics, Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez explains that capitalism creates

a depersonalized, dehumanized, hollow man [sic], emptied of any concrete, vital content, a man who tamely allows himself to be molded by any manipulator of consciousness; in short, mass man.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, he uses

the term "mass art" in a pejorative sense, defining it as a pseudo-art deliberately produced by the dominant class to be enjoyed and consumed by mass men. The revolutionary proletariat, because it is the class which revindicates the human essence, deserves a superior

art, not artistic by-products which numb the senses, mutilate the mind, and misdirect creative energies.<sup>19</sup>

For Sanchez Vazquez, people are transformed from hollow to fully achieved by the agency of revolutionary ideas, although he does not explain how these concepts are disseminated. The modern era inhibits true artistic achievement because of capitalist imperatives, and genuine art can only be achieved after the communist revolution. However he does not comment on the state of mass media arts under existing socialisms.

Along with some other post-Stalin Marxists, Sanchez Vazquez represents a break with rigid adherence to 19th century realist norms in art. He accepts modernism, although he sees problems with alienated artists. He also acknowledges the power of a collective, popular, folk art (which "does not exist in highly industrialized capitalist countries.") but rejects mass produced art. Notice the assumptions in this passage:

In order to *tear* reified, alienated people away from the mass art which they consume every day and *get them to enjoy* an authentic art, it is *necessary first to pull them out* of their reification or alienation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>my italics

Metaphors of force, authenticity, and falsity crop up again and again in this writing. They are linked to a belief that value, artistic quality, is easily distinguished by those who are trained, that is specialists such as aestheticians. The traditionally defined and accepted masterpieces stand above and outside of history. That the definitions of greatness and the canon of works he endorses are very historically and culturally specific, is not taken into account by Sanchez Vazquez or other Marxist thinkers who use similar premises. That different social groups might have different tastes, standards, and experiences in art is ignored. True art shines as a transhistorical universal created by inspired geniuses.

How can Marxists approach mass culture without falling into the moralistic reductionism of traditional left analysis? The playwright Bertolt Brecht gives a possible model with his remarks on the film *Gunga Din* (George Stevens, 1939).

One of the Indians betrayed his compatriots to the British, sacrificed his life so that his fellow-countrymen should be defeated, and earned the audience's heartfelt applause. My heart was touched too: I felt like applauding, and laughed in all the right places. Despite the fact that I knew all the time that there was something wrong, that the Indians are not primitive and uncultured people but have a magnificent age-old culture, and that this *Gunga Din* could also be seen in a very different light, e.g. as a traitor to his people. I was amused and touched because this utterly distorted account was an artistic success

and considerable resources in talent and ingenuity had been applied in making it.<sup>21</sup>

Brecht does something quite rare here: he acknowledges that his own emotional experience of art does not always match his political judgement of it. Significantly, he does not assume that the audience is racist and imperialist and simply responding to the mirror of its own prejudices, but he recognizes the influence of artistic craft on shaping response. Brecht refers to content *and* craft. He understands the need to examine more than simple content, and to see and account for his own implication in the film's effect.

### Psycho-social Critiques

Where the Marxist content analysis approach often sees corruption at the ideological micro-level, such as the single line of dialogue in a film or comic strip, another approach which I call psycho-social sees the problem at the macro-level of all society. By interpreting mass culture in terms of large patterns of mass social psychology, analysts such as Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse saw the impact of mass culture in more than just the surface level of consciousness. The unconscious is affected as well by a massive capitalist industry which controls images and entertainment throughout society. Its influence is both subtle and extremely pernicious. As Adorno argues,

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<sup>21</sup>brecht

It can be assumed without hesitation that steady drops hollow the stone, especially since the system of the culture industry that surrounds the masses tolerates hardly any deviation and incessantly drills the same formulas of behavior.<sup>22</sup>

Adorno's overall tone is one of being totally appalled by mass culture, particularly the American variety. A highly educated and cultured Viennese who was exiled to the U.S. in the late 1930s and who settled finally in Los Angeles, Adorno's standards for culture were those of European high culture. In the American context this made him a purist and elitist and—in his studies of jazz—a clearcut racist.<sup>23</sup>

In his central essay, "The Culture Industry," written with Max Horkheimer, Adorno describes mass culture as smothering any individuality and reducing art to uniformity and repetition—a commercial style with no substance because it has the same endless substance. It places the public in the position of being passive consumers who are so inundated by the banality of mass culture that they end up with a kind of Pavlovian response and want precisely what is deadening to their minds, their creativity, and imaginations. Everything is corrupted by the culture industry—even language loses its meaning through commercials and inane lyrics. In the process of this social conditioning of the audience, the entertainment function of

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art takes over all the other functions. In fact the audience does not experience true leisure (re-creation); rather, entertainment is transformed into an extension of work. It prepares zombies for the next day of capitalist production. The culture industry indoctrinates us all. Adorno elaborates:

In so far as [animated] cartoons do any more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous friction, the breaking down of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment.<sup>24</sup>

In Adorno's view the culture industry comes very close to being a system of total social control. It is clearly totalitarian in effect and for all practical purposes fascist. Hitler's mobilization of public opinion through media and culture bore a fundamental likeness to the operation of the culture industry in capitalist democracy.

The power of Adorno's critique rests in its totality which also results in its overwhelming pessimism. Adorno sees no way of reversing the trend. Rather than the future being phrased in the usual Marxist choice of "socialism or barbarism," tomorrow holds nothing but mass media barbarism. Adorno's critique, like the content analysis

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<sup>24</sup>adorno

approach, relies on a model of the passive audience. Having no confidence in the power of the audience to select, filter, or regard critically, seeing no genuine source of contradiction in modern capitalist society (apparently because he did not believe that class struggle was still going on), Adorno was bound to conclude that mass culture produced a total cooptation and deformation of all progressive tendencies in modern history. Only very late in his life, when confronted with empirical evidence that audiences are not passive dupes, did he begin to recognize that his formulation of a total integration of mass consciousness into the culture industry was inadequate.<sup>25</sup>

Adorno's example raises a problem that reoccurs throughout the history and range of radical cultural analysis, and which complicates its study. Intellectuals do not work in a vacuum. To understand what Adorno puts forward, it helps to also understand for whom and against what he was writing. Adorno and Horkheimer presented "The Culture Industry" as a response to two different tendencies. First, on the left, they were critical of a trend in radical cultural thought that celebrated modern mass production in the workplace as well as in art. The famous cream separator sequence in *The Old and the New* (*The General Line*, Eisenstein and Alexandrov, 1929) embodies a positive evaluation of the machine in life and art as skeptical peasants watch the initial trial of a labor-saving dairy device. As the separator starts to operate, a rhythmic montage of shots also begins

until finally the sequence reaches a climax with the machine separating cream and milk, and peasant skepticism about the new-fangled device (and the politics of agricultural collectivization) swept away in mechanical triumph, and rapid montage editing exhilaration. Fascination with the possibilities of mechanical reproduction in art inspired many left intellectuals to argue for the radical potential of new media. But Adorno, writing in 1944 with the perspective of the Third Reich and World War 2, was understandably and profoundly more pessimistic about technology's social-political role.

Living in exile in the U.S., Adorno met and worked with social scientists who were beginning the first extended and serious investigation of the nature and effects of mass communication. Here Adorno encountered a pragmatic and positivist view of the media which exempted the object of study from a profound social and political critique. But for Adorno, the engineering of social consent and political consciousness in Nazi Germany and in the U.S. appeared alarmingly similar. In this context, Adorno's thesis of the culture industry as keystone of total social control makes sense, and many radicals have found them productive. Adorno is not a conservative, horrified by the arrival of democracy, industrialization, and modern urban life. Yet his critique remains one-sided because he imagines no resistance to the culture industry's imperatives. Writing at a later date, Herbert Marcuse makes much the same argument that the consciousness of the petty bourgeoisie and the working class in advanced capitalist society has become integrated into the dominant

order and is the main support for it. The resulting situation produced a "One Dimensional Man" [sic] and a social structure in which opposition emerges only with

...the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable. ...Their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not.<sup>26</sup>

But there is no assurance, Marcuse goes on, of a better future. Along with Adorno and other members of their intellectual circle, the Frankfurt School, who called their general position "critical theory," Marcuse asserts:

The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative.<sup>27</sup>

"Critical theory" responds to and rejects the two main Marxist positions on achieving socialism in the industrialized capitalist world. The reformist or social democrat tradition stresses the inevitability of socialism won through trade union development and electoral politics. It tends to work within established institutions, to form alliances with liberals, and it seeks to increase the basic consciousness of socialism

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<sup>26</sup>in contrast to proletariat as rev. agency  
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qualitatively and quantitatively in the population. Often sharply opposed, the revolutionary socialist tendency, often linked with Lenin, argues against gradual reform and for the existence of sharp breaks in history, moments of rapid qualitative change in consciousness, while stressing the building of a radical political party which would lead labor and governmental contests for power with the aim of taking control of the means of production, that is, the means of producing wealth such as industry, transportation, and communication, as well as the state apparatus.

Although otherwise opposed in ideas, analysis, tactics and action, both reformist and revolutionary Marxists agree on the philosophic question of agency in history: what can and will overthrow capitalism? The proletariat, the working class which comes into being with the emergence of capitalism as the economic base of society. However, the lived reality of Marxism across more than a century of history generates new questions about the working class's role. In the capitalist industrialized countries, the worker's movement has contested for power without winning it. The trade union movement in the U.S. accommodates itself to capitalism and its leaders often hinder militancy within unions and the workplace. Other serious questions have been raised in the 20th century such as the rise of fascism in Italy, Spain, and Germany, and its being accepted or endured by large portions of the population. And *where* the left was able to come to power in the modern era did not fit the 19th century blueprints: Russia, the most backward of the capitalist nations in 1917 with about 2 million

workers and 148 million peasants; Eastern Europe where socialism followed the Red Army's advance on the Nazis; China where Communists carried out protracted guerrilla warfare while allied with nationalists to expell imperialist Japan and built an immense peasant base to defeat the national bourgeoisie and landowners in turn. Such events challenge and become part of the evolving Marxist tradition as expressed in a wide variety of forms ranging from intra-party debates on policy, strategy, and tactics, on the one hand, to the lived reality of people engaged in political organizing on the other.

It must be remembered that these issues are not abstract, although they may seem so when reading polemical exchanges or theoretical discussions of the issues. What may seem to be "aesthetic" debates to non-Marxists have a very immediate and practical side for Marxists who are concerned with what kind of a political art should be made. For example, the now-famous debate between literary critic George Lukacs and dramatist Bertolt Brecht over questions of realism and modernism in literature had direct repercussions for indicating what kind of art the left should be validating and making. Similarly, what is centrally and politically at stake in contemporary radical media theory is an answer to the question: what kind of media should we make if we want to change the world? Lenin's old question, "What is to be done?" is never totally removed from left discussions of art and media.

## **Ideology**

One of the most distinct developments in Marxist thought since the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* gives central attention to subjective factors in history. Sometimes phrased within discussions of class consciousness and other times using the concept of ideology, this concern has been a major theme of many western marxist thinkers such as Lukacs, the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, the French philosophers Henri Lefebvre, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Louis Althusser, the central European exiles of the Frankfurt School, and the U.S. New Left Marxists. The publication or rediscovery of a number of works such as Marx's early writings, the Marx-Engels study *The German Ideology*, Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, and the subsequent reflection on this material by Lefebvre in his *Dialectical Materialism*, and most importantly by Mao Zedung in his essays, "On Practice," and "On Contradiction," feeds a tendency within Marxism which is different than the received orthodoxy.

True, the productive forces, practice and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive role; whoever denies this is not a materialist. But it must also be admitted that in certain conditions, such aspects as the relations of production, theory and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role....When the superstructure (politics, culture, etc.)

obstructs the development of the economic base, political and cultural changes become principal and decisive.<sup>28</sup>

Such ideas become events in the world communist movement. The Chinese Cultural Revolution was an attempt to change consciousness and ideology on a mass scale, and its successes and failures have stimulated new thought about ideology in turn.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most productive distinctions concerning ideology comes from Gramsci who pointed out that the bourgeoisie as a class was able to maintain its position by domination or direct coercion, and that it did so, particularly through the state's direct intervention with police and military power. However, Gramsci also pointed out, the ruling class also maintains its power with ideological control. Under advanced capitalism, this kind of control over the civil sector of society was more important and effective for the interests of the capitalist class since it could achieve the same effects but through consent, and in this way it maintained ideological *hegemony* as he called it.

Precisely how this ideological control is exercised is a debated question among Marxists. Some look to the direct propagation of false ideas as evidenced in advertising, corporate and government manipulation of the press and public opinion, and directly didactic items such as school texts (often the site of a clash with right-wing forces). This analysis

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<sup>28</sup>Mao

<sup>29</sup>explain more

"creationism" etc,  
birth control etc.



can be expanded to seeing the less direct perpetuation of values in mass media fictions, and such an analysis meshes well with considerations of overt and implied racism and sexism. The general model of consciousness that this approach implies is one in which people uncritically receive false ideas, and it implies in turn that the left needs to propagate true ideas which will then replace the false ones. In some ways it resembles the conversion model of evangelistic Protestantism.

But influenced by a number of intellectual trends, such as psychology, anthropology, and cultural analysis, some Marxists have found the familiar model of false consciousness inadequate and sought a more complex one that would account for people resisting "correct" ideas, maintaining old ways and patterns of thought, and not changing simply through rational persuasion. Rather than simply looking at the content, they consider the form and context of ideology. For example, rather than simply noting ideas in the school curriculum, they consider the authoritarian and hierarchical structure of schools and how this shapes personality and socialization. Rather than assuming that "bad" ideas enter the "haven" of the family, they consider how the very structure of social relations and the practices of child rearing within the family shape the unconscious parts of the mind. Since art works on and with people's minds so profoundly beyond the level of simple content, artists and cultural workers have been especially interested in this fuller development of thinking about ideology.

While these two approaches have often been phrased in extremely antagonistic ways by different figures, it is more productive to see a spectrum of ideological activity, particularly in relation to analyzing the media. Of course, sometimes there is direct inculcation of beliefs and values in society. The "Pledge of Allegiance" to the flag in U.S. schools or the playing and singing of the national anthem are obvious examples. Similarly, a Presidential address or press conference is a direct attempt to manipulate public opinion. But society also works structurally to place people in accordance with the system. Before I was born relatives had begun to put aside money to send me to college, and every birthday and Christmas included more money earmarked for the fund. While in one sense I had free will to decide on whether or not to go to college when I was 17, in another sense there was a social consensus and expectation that I would before I was born. That I did go was not a matter of perfect free choice. In that sense I was "placed" in society and in relation to the educational system in a certain way.

add here discussion of range of media/ideology from direct to unconscious.

Certainly capitalism would run better if people were automatons in production and consumption, but it cannot produce such people on demand. Worker and consumer resistance to capitalist desires, schemes, and goals comes from many sources. The ideology that comes from the dominant media is not injected into people's minds the

way a hypodermic needle injects a substance into the bloodstream. It is moderated and changed in the process of being understood and used. Many factors intervene in the formation of ideas and behaviors. Everyday life and consciously held values often present compelling alternatives to whatever is presented by the mass media. By reducing complex relations to simple cause-and-effect ones and by using stimulus-response behavioral models to describe highly imaginative mental behavior, moralistic mass culture analysis fails to be accurate and is no foundation for taking action. Control and manipulation theorists of mass culture remain unable to advise radical artists and media makers about what could be done in the present.

In poetically dismissing Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*, Marx and Engels labelled the novel political and aesthetic trash. But this judgement does not tell the whole story, for as the Italian Marxist semiologist, Umberto Eco, points out in a detailed analysis of the novel, most of its readers

did not grasp its reformist implications, and from the total message only certain more obvious meanings filtered through to them (the dramatic situation of the working class, the depravity of some of those in power, the necessity for change of no matter what kind, and so on).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>eco

Thus Sue's 1844 novel contributed to the popular revolt of 1848; it provided an imaginative structure which was part of the mass crystallization of consciousness in political revolution. Eco concludes,

we must keep in mind a principle, characteristic of any examination of mass communication media (of which the popular novel is one of the most spectacular examples): the message which has been evolved by an educated elite (in a cultural group or a kind of communications headquarters, which takes its lead from the political or economic group in power) is expressed at the outset in terms of a fixed code, but it is caught by divers groups of receivers and deciphered on the basis of other codes. The sense of the message often undergoes a kind of filtration or distortion in the process, which completely alters its "pragmatic" function.<sup>31</sup>

Marxist analysis of art and culture must be rooted in the historical specificity of reception rather than an ahistorical notion of aesthetic value. This is not to say that the question of value does not enter into art making and criticism. But it is to point out the historical specificity of judgement, of taste. And it is to point out the complexity and selection involved in art reception, especially mass arts which go to diverse publics.

specific discussion of working class culture.

From beginnings to here, you often refer to the "left". Hardly anyone besides our US political comrades from the 70's to now will know whom that means or by that term (or case?). Someone else set up a discussion of what that term involves, and then, as if in process, constantly make up a "concise" and recontextualize it.

Theory, lect 3/4

[get xerox of notes from 3]

*discussion - outline  
last of deriv. of film theory  
This all depends on the way you see film theory in 1968 and maybe needs to be tried to it more closely*

### Structuralism

1) a movement, method, first developed in anthropology and then xferred to the other human sciences which draws on structural linguistics (the work of Saussure).

Best known proponent, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Essentially developed to study "static" cultures (therefore questionable how it can be applied to changing ones).

2) it relies on an analysis of relationships which are seen as significant patterns. (often patterns of binary opposition and substitution.) These are found through looking for patterns of repetition and difference. [explain, 19th c. discovery of classification by difference, not similarity]

example: oedipal conflict narrative. (a narrative structure)

basic structure: father and son in conflict over woman (3 term relationship)

women has volition, can help one or other  
father has initial power [NB these terms are symbolic]  
must be displaced. a power struggle, but framed within  
and sexuality.

gender

Basic Western Love Myth: Tristan and Isolde (tragic version)  
Comic oedipal version. [see my analysis of *Shampoo*]

The basic question: once we see the repetition of the basic pattern over time and so many different examples in different times and places, we have to acknowledge that it is significant. Why is it there?

Structuralism was useful in cultural analysis because it went beyond, provided a position for critiquing:

Empiricism and positivism

empiricism: the world can be adequately known through  
examination of its tangible phenomena  
positivism: the tools and methods of investigating the hard  
sciences are applicable to social phenomena;  
anti-historical

Historicism; that history tells its own truth which is revealed in the  
evidence (as against contemporary notion that history is  
a constructed discourse about the past)

Rhetorical, Aristotelean analysis (another ahistorical analysis;  
mechanistic, of fixed categories (eg, tragedy)

Organic analysis: unity of form and content, very powerful when

combined with historical analysis; but, has limits in cultural analysis when it does not offer a way of looking at systematic absence (esp. oppression), can be used to simply accept what already is, rather than look for potential for change. (NB structuralism has this same problem)

Structural analysis is also very compatible with Formalism, esp. as developed by Russian Formalists. Esp. in close analysis of formal features.

The appeal of structuralism. It tries to develop models which could then be used to analyze a relationship--it lends itself well to **comparative** analysis. In terms of film, it applies well to the patterns of repetition that were being developed in authorship criticism.

It also fits well with ideas of narrative, esp. well in terms of formulaic fictions, eg. mainstream H'wood film.

It has been frequently used as an approach which combines genre and social analysis (eg. Will Wright's Sixguns and Society; which sees the critique of by Janey Place in JC); the problem with it is that it often remains static, and that it often refuses history.

Opens up the possibility of a **symptomatic** reading: something which is found to be significant in cultural objects being investigated, can itself be taken as evidence of a more profound pattern within the culture as a whole. (eg. absence or marginalization of certain groups is itself revealing--Blacks appear only as servants, and only for a brief moment; women insignificant in (most examples of) war, gangster, western, male action film--there only to mark something about the hero, or to be raped or murdered to further the plot. Eg. 2nd Rambo film. NB. not in all cases, we are talking about dominant patterns, not absolute rules.

The dissatisfaction that most people feel with a pure structuralism (and why it hardly exists as such, at least in film studies) is that it seems finally, to assign agency (why things happen, how they might change) to the structure. (In this it is much like Jungian criticism, archetypal analysis.) In this sense its ideas tend to be taken over for diagnostic or symptomatic purposes rather than ends in themselves.

Some examples, developing structuralism in a Marxist/feminist criticism:

Charles Eckert, "Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner's **Marked Woman**" in M&M2

Charles Eckert, "Shirley Temple and the House of Rockefeller" in JC: HP&CC.

Chuck Kleinhans, "Shampoo: Oedipal Symmetrie and Heterosexual Knots" JC

Julia Lesage, "Celine and Julie Go Boating:" JC 24/25

### The Cahiers analysis of Morocco

from CdC 225 (Nov-Dec 1970) 5-13

*start of section on semiotic -  
analytic; developed in terms  
of feminist arguments -*

begins with quote from Georges Bataille which takes a dim view of H'wood:

"it seems impossible...to discover anywhere else in the world women so unnatural, gross, impossible." Love, the philosophy of the boudoir, is demeaned.

1. This analysis is a continuation of the YML piece  
there CdC demonstrated that the ideological *énoncé*--what is uttered in itself--is subverted by the stress effects of the Fordien writing.  
[i.e. Ford's style/form changes the ideological content]

2. YML is the ethical-political face of the capitalist and theological face of H'wood.

**Morocco** is its erotic face. H'wood is the major site of the production of the erotic myths of bourgeois society. (erotic is equated with fetishist, w/o explanation)

3. From Kristeva, the change in the 14th c. from epic to novelesque (romance).

women is offered up as a "pseudo-center"; not as women in her social reality but as figure which the men (author/hero) then relates to; she exists so he can ect.

[NB this is an analysis of the text itself, not of the reception of the text; but that will be significantly changed in Mulvey's analysis which also draws on Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (implicitly, at least) because she will also discuss reception by the viewer-subject} this is also not really a very good analysis of changing nature of narrative placement of women at this time; cannot be sustained as an analysis in other national literatures very well. This section is the foundation for all later Lacanian influenced ideas on the position of women represented in the narrative.

4. NB. "This reciprocal absorption of the One and the Other (the Author and the Woman) within an effacement of sexual difference accounts for (and implies) the fact that the Masquerade, Virile Display and Inversion are the erotic paradigms of Morocco." Now, actually, all of this is also based very much on the knowledge of CdC that Sternberg was himself sexually ambiguous (bisexual, or multisexual). In many ways they cannot really accept this and their subsequent discussion (and that of many of the followers of this line of thought) are fundamentally premised on rigid sex/gender differentiation. They do not like ambiguity.

5. From Lacan: "in order to be the phallus (the signifier of the desire of the Other) (that is in order to function within the image/narration as the indicator of the woman's desire), a woman will reject part of femininity, her attributes in the masquerade." (Is this really perfectly clear? No, not really, they borrow some concepts from Lacan, but its a kind of imaginative borrowing--its useful to their purposes, they take it over very casually) See Fn to Montrelay: In order to produce this, a woman takes on masquerade (as clothing) to say nothing.

6. In YML the diegetic process called for a chronological reading. In Morocco the structures are repeated with variation. Thus a synchronic reading is justified.

7. There is a double determination--the erotic and the social.

8. Two love triangles:

Le B. loves Amy Jolly who loves Brown  
just as  
Cessee loves Mme. C. who loves Brown

(relationship of Europeans and Moroccans).

9. Erotic relations take place within the framework of a social situation which determines the erotic relations and is determined by them. The social and the erotic form two levels, "inscriptions" in the discourse. The existing social hierarchy is "perverted" by the erotic.

10. Social stratification

- a. the haute bourgeoisie. Le B.
- b. the colonial bourgeoisie. Le B's friends, the dinner party
- c. the native bourgeoisie
- d. officers of the Legion (Capt. Caesar)



- e. owner of the cabaret
- f. lower strata of Legionnaires, Moroccan crowds, singers, dancers, prostitutes of the cabaret, camp followers.

The men are fixed in position, the women (may have) some fluidity. Mme Caesar dresses "down" as a Moroccan woman. Amy Jolly is fallen in class at the start, is promoted in the film and then chooses to fall again [but for a higher goal, true love, true desire].

The object of desire is of inferior status to the desiring subject. [NB w/in the diegesis]

11. The film shows a "topographical inscription": High/Low in the town and the cabaret; and horizontal between the town and the desert. Desiring subjects find their object in the depths. The desert is the pure signifier of desire.

sets of opposition

Europeans	Moroccans
Old World	New World (Brown)
status	déclassé
grids	uniform white expense

12. Mythological determinations. The historical role of the star in the H'wood system. A star has a relatively restricted number of possible types. The extrafilmic and filmic come together in indicating a role. Importance of her first appearance; she has had wealth and erotic success, but this "past capital" has been squandered.

13. Von Sternberg's inscription. First LeB approx. = Sternberg. At first the protector and savior of Dietrich, then the men who will not be taken over by a woman and who then devalues her. Second, theme of abandonment. Caesar is abandoned by his wife. LeB is abandoned by Amy Jolly. LeB lowers himself in the whole process [wouldn't this be better understood as mesochism?] Note the transgressive effect--a transgression of the social codes through public admission of distress, defeat, irremedial loss.

14. [The analysis ignores the kles AJ gives the women in the cabaret. Is this a show for Brown? Yes, but it can also be taken in other ways; it too is a transgression of the social codes, through public admission of erotic interest in other women.]

15. The relation of femininity to virility is inverted from the phallogocentric fantasy. Here Brown is inferior in social position and is AJ's object of desire. The women move from the Old World to the New, to the American.

La B is an inverted virility--shows preciou behavior. Similarly, Lo Tinto, the cafe owner, is mixed race, shows eigne of feminty, gayness.

16. The critique of the **fetishism** of value. In H'wood fetishism moves from commodity to chereacters, in an erotic fiction.

17. "All values in Morocco are fetishee: money, jewels, clothes, woman (ster)." These are extra-cinematic. Sternberg's use of their fetishist nature does not exhaust their value, but accentuates it. "The Sternbergian fetish, therefore, does not inscribe itself into the fiction *solely* as a signifier of castration--it is not solely involved in the trajectories of the erotic (as their cause)." [The is an acknowledgement here that the fetish object does not exist only as erotic, but also as social, in meaning; both are needed; in fact, one potentiates the other.]

18. [But much of the specific argument made here by CdC is based on Lacan's essay "The Signification of the Phallus," which is not a neutral analysis, e.g. the acceptance of the concept of castration as unproblematic. Why Lacan, and what did he say? Lacan introducee a version of Freudian psychoanalysis into French thought which had mostly rejected or resisted psychoanalysis. He makes e number of very significant changes in Freud, particularly in locating the basis of consciousness not in e series of stages of development in childhood, but in the "mirror phase" and the acquisition of language. He takes over concepts of structural linguistics; his work, then, is in many ways complementary with that of Althusser on ideology.]

19. [The key question as it develops in terms of the transfer and development of ideas is how psychoanalysis is used, and its own status. In general, there is a problematic situation here. Freudian thought comes very early to the US, and very late to England and France. There is a rather massive extension, elaboration, and critique of Freudian thought, particularly in its implications for social action in the U.S. The early feminist movement in the US takes a very negative and skeptical view of Freudian analysis and its intellectual model; but the French, and in turn the British, find it very appealing and tend to be uncritical of the whole project. There ensues e very complicated, and often antagonistic use of psychoanalysis in critical discussion, particularly in feminist film thought. The important thing in terms of theoretical development, is the status of these concepts: there is often an extreme sliding between different levels of thought. The "scientificness" of psychoanalysis is invoked to declare its truth, but there is also e frequent use of it in e merely symbolic and approximate way, and a "hiding" of the more problematic aspects of it; this is particularly so with its relation to feminism. Rather than actually

rigorously thinking through the conjunction of psychoanalysis, marxism, feminism, and film, and how they can be used together, often there is a sloppy *ad hoc* appropriation and/or a mere citation of authority. This is rather characteristic of film theory in general; often a wholesale taking over of a different system without really examining it carefully.]

20. Deitrich's power of seduction and fascination. In the cabaret, she is elusive and untouchable (except by Brown). She is fetishized in proportion to her inaccessibility. "The moralizing inscription of the renunciation of her accessories is overdetermined by the inscription of them as fetish objects which renew the chain of desire." The film ends up within H'wood-- a circular critique of the ideology of natural purity and of fetishism by natural purity. The film ends with the fetish (AJ) chasing the mirage (Brown). [In other words, the film has a critique in it, a certain kind of critique, which is limited. By casting off the cultural signs of eroticism (the jewels, the shoes), AJ seems to be renouncing the artificial for the "natural"; but this is a characteristic move of the dominant ideology, or ideology in general. What is in fact cultural is posed as natural, especially in terms of the down side of a power relationship: women, children, Blacks, etc. are seen as "natural" because they are without power. Sternberg actually cannot present something which is pure and natural as the binary opposition of the artificial, but just ends up with a confused inversion. In other words, Sternberg presents everything within the framework of the artificial and cultural; he then seems to produce a renunciation of that in the pursuit of a pure desire (natural), but cannot really do so.]

21. Brown as mirage. Two times he leaves, but leaves a trace, which motivates AJ to pursue him: the message on the mirror, her name on the table; and finally he leaves for the desert.

## Subtexts and Audiences

Film theory in the 70s and 80s tended to a formalism which studied the text as a self-contained entity. In traditional formalist analysis the text is taken without attention to "extrinsic" matters of production and consumption. From within this view, it is possible to see the text as producing a certain specific effect: thus modernist texts are seen as demanding or producing ironic or self-referential or intertextual effects. When combined with a political concern, this fundamental stance can endorse the idea that texts unquestionably produce certain spectator reactions. Thus the classical realist text, the classical Hollywood film, produces a passive consumer who simply takes the constructed text as a reflection of reality. Or the avant garde or Brechtian text forces a certain audience reaction. The metaphor of force, of the film text forcing a certain understanding or reaction on the audience appears throughout film theory from the *Cahiers du cinéma* "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" piece to the present.

For example, in discussing Bruce Conner's experimental film, **Marilyn Times Five**,<sup>1</sup> I argued that the film could force certain spectator reactions. But on further thought I came to question the metaphor of force because of its often masculinist connotations, because my classroom experiences in teaching films which critics called forced certain reactions which didn't appear among my students, and because my own subsequent filmmaking showed me that the concept of misreading was

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<sup>1</sup>JC I rept Kay/Perry

probably more productive than the concept of a unitary textual effect. Now to some extent most critics using the metaphor of force, if questioned, would probably add the qualification that, of course the predicted effect would take place only with a receiver who actually fully or adequately understood the work--It would always be possible for someone to refuse to accept the work, to suspend disbelief, to be inadequate in aesthetic education, and to thus get it wrong. But that qualification has in it the assumption that there is a correct aesthetic experience, and that is precisely what students and teachers tend to take for granted in the arts. The student is supposed to learn the proper way of understanding the work, the proper kind of experience to have with it, and perhaps the correct interpretation of its meaning. And teachers match this with their half of the process: assuming that they know the proper path to enlightenment and the true interpretation (or perhaps the acceptable range of interpretation).

But the metaphor of force tends to posit a single homogenous entity sitting before the screen. Applied to commercial media, it explains the solitary meaning of a film or tv show and often seems little more than a clever and detailed version of the old interpretation analysis. Applied to the avant garde, it is equally predictive. In response to some of the obvious problems with this model, the theory of the subject as developed by Stephen Heath, Kaja Silverman, and others attempts to discuss the film-audience relation in a different way. While portions of this theory moved in a more sophisticated direction, it remains so abstract as to be inadequate. As Heath put it,

What "subject" designates is not a unity, not even a unity of division, but a construction and process, a heterogeneity, an intersection....A theory of ideology must then begin not from the subject but as an account of suturing effects, the effecting of the join of the subject in structures of meaning....<sup>2</sup>

Seeing the subject as a contradiction-in-process is essential. Where I differ from this concept is in its separation of the subject (essentially as an effect of the text) from socially and historically existing audiences. To fully understand suturing effects we must understand the text and the concrete and specific viewers of that text who are themselves contradictory and in process. While theoretically acknowledging the requirement for socio-historic specificity, in actual practice the theory of the subject remains on the side of the text. The subject exists without class, race, gender, nationality, or other social factors. It has no history or every history. By remaining resolutely anti-sociological (apparently unable to conceive of a Marxist sociology), the theory of the subject remains idealist in practice.

However, if we grasp both the multiplicity of the film text and the variation in the audience, we can understand the dual and paired process of how audiences construct meaning as well as how films construct audiences. I certainly don't want to underestimate the problems involved. Although the work of Barthes and Eco has demonstrated the dense complexity of mass culture objects and events, and although we have

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<sup>2</sup>Heath QoC 106

many recent case studies showing how artistically sophisticated popular culture is. we have a long way to go in understanding the rich heterogeneity of individual and aggregate viewers.

The multiplicity of most mass culture texts, the not so paradoxical openness of closed texts, the productive ambiguity of the classic Hollywood film, is beginning to be understood in a more profound way. In particular it becomes an issue in particular social and political subcultures in terms of the politics of representation and control of images. For example, the film **Personal Best** became a topic of heated discussion in the North American lesbian community in an exchange which concerned all the fundamental questions of film audience theory: personal response, political response, the image of women, body image, identification and point of view, analysis and evaluation, the nature of subcultural response, variation within subcultures, the nature of ideology, reading and misreading. That this discussion went on in lesbian bars and homes, in the cultural feminist press, did not make it less intellectually valid than typical academic discourse.

I don't mean by arguing for the importance of specific and oppressed subcultures in understanding society and cultural processes that outsiders, particularly from dominant groups, should colonize this area. Intellectual neocolonialization is a potential danger in the new emphasis on multiculturalism being pushed by corporate liberalism in the form of the Rockefeller Foundation, etc. But I do mean that people from those privileged sections should listen to what is being said. The abstract problems of a theory of mass culture are frequently made very concrete in

the cultural discussions of people who exist in a relation of struggle with the dominant culture. Richard Wright and LeRoi Jones eloquently refute Theodor Adorno's racist views of blues and jazz. We can learn much from such work: much more than in teasing out new refinements on some of the overworked simplicities of continental philosophy.

I am arguing for a theory of misreading as a necessary part of a theory of reading. I am arguing for a more sophisticated view of entertainment films which sees their potential for a multiplicity of responses as well as an understanding of the audience as contradictory in the individual and as a collective. From a fuller understanding of the popular we can begin a rethinking of radical oppositional cinema as well. Questions of identification and visual pleasure demand rethinking once audience heterogeneity is recognized. Such a recognition is sobering: there is no instant answer to questions of content and form, but neither is there an endless and floating ambiguity. There are actual films, programs, tapes, recordings, and actual audiences, and mistakes to be made and lessons to be learned. As Lenin put it,

pull this  
out - it's a  
key point

In order to understand, it is necessary empirically to begin understanding, study, to rise from empiricism to the universal. In order to learn to swim, it is necessary to get into the water.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>(PN 205)



## **Some Basic Propositions on the Nature of the Audience**

aka The Mode of Existence of the Mass Culture Audience

1. Texts are polysemic. That is, any one particular text can be interpreted and experienced in different ways by different specific individuals. In other words, texts are open to various readings and meanings. This is part of the nature of all audio-visual moving image texts. Semiology explains this in terms of the multiplicity of codes, conventions, of texts.
2. Typically there is a dominant (or preferred, or apparent, or apparently intended) reading of most texts, especially those that circulate commercially.
3. At the same time, there is no way of forcing someone to accept the dominant reading.
4. People can and do misread texts. It is possible to read all or part of a text in ways other than the dominant one. This is not to claim a total relativism of meaning. It is not true that "any" reading is possible, with the possible exception of people who have a completely different agenda for the text (e.g., cabalistic readings, allegorical readings fitting into other systems beyond the social framework of the times, "psychotic" readings, etc.).

5. The actual response of any one receiver must be understood in a number of ways. This includes the phenomenology of the viewing experience (Metz and others). It also included the cultural and social factors which are operating in reading a text.

6. Because these social-cultural factors (typically and pertinently in most cases of mass culture, those of class, nationality, race/ethnicity, gender, education, age, and so forth) shape reading, audiences must be understood as heterogeneous.

7. Audiences can neither be totally categorized and reduced to a single term or concept, nor can they be seen as totally arbitrary.

8. Audience response must be understood as constituting a range of perceptin and understanding that includes the intellectual, the emotional, and the physical. This has been phrased in different ways by different theorists, but in one way or another, it is taken into account by concepts such as conscious/unconscious, Imaginary/symbolic, etc.

9. Because the text is a complex arrangement of signs and is polysemic, its meaning cannot be fixed or closed.

10. However some texts are more likely to produce a wider range of readings than others.

11. When we study a text we can study the preferred reading. Then we need to ask, how is this dominant reading conveyed?

12. Or we can study variant readings, then we need to ask which ones and how they are conveyed.

13. Or we can study preferred and variant readings plus considering the interaction/interrelation of both types of readings. How do they complement each other or contradict each other?

14. We need to be alert to what is (a) in the text, and (b) in the audience that could produce variant readings.

15. When we add the dimension of entertainment to information, things become more complex. The very nature of pleasure and leisure in society is part of the concern.

16. With series and genres we are dealing with something which is through familiarity and convention already known, even before we see it. For example, the social meaning of soap operas is already known by audiences before they watch the day's episode.

17. Audiences are not passive. They are active: selecting, interpreting, rejecting, discounting, exaggerating. The audience helps construct meaning. There is not a predetermined meaning which is inserted into a "message" and then coded/decoded. Rather, people produce texts in a process of working within and choosing among different conventional codes

of signification appropriate to that mass culture format and genre (the evening news, the morning game show, the horror film, the made-for-tv movie about a social problem, etc.)

18. Most people most of the time will understand the intended meaning or something fairly close to it. Others will vary. These variants often seem to be linked to variants in social structure as well as personal experience.

19. What we are talking about is one manifestation of ideology.

20. People belong to groups. This is studied by (some) psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.

21. One way of discussing how people are politically-culturally organized is through the concept of subcultures. A subculture can be provisionally defined as a set of meaning systems and modes of expression which are developed by groups in the course of dealing with shared contradictions. A subculture is a "pool of available symbolic resources" (here and elsewhere I am indebted to David Morley, *The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding*).

22. Signs are social. They arise in social interaction and communication. This is obscured by some types of formalist semiotics.

23. Consciousness is social. On the level of the individual reader there are idiosyncratic readings and interpretations which cannot be totally

predicted. On the level of social groups of readers, there are systematic patterns.

24. "In short we need to see how the different sub-cultural structures and formations within the audience, and the sharing of different cultural codes and competencies amongst different groups and classes, 'determine' the decoding of the message for different sections of the audience." (Morley, 15)

25. The audience is not simply a mass of individuals, nor is it an aggregate of individuals who take on a homogenous mass nature. Rather it is a number of subcultural formations/groupings who share a cultural orientation in reading/decoding. While the audience is a group of individuals, those individuals' readings are framed by shared cultural formations and practices which pre-exist the individual. (These vary with various factors.) Such factors set parameters to individual experience but do not determine consciousness in a direct way.

26. The problem of the relation of base and superstructure, of the general economic system of capitalism and its cultural manifestations has usually been settled with in philosophical Marxism in terms of "relative autonomy" (Engels, Althusser, many others). In this case determination is postponed to "the last instance" which never comes (in Althusser's phrasing). However Lenin makes a much more acute analysis of the same problem and points out that it is in the class struggle (in its most intensely political phase, that is in the moment of revolution—the seizure

of state power and the means of production) that the last instance arrives in a concrete form.

27. Some people have rejected the idea of relative autonomy: e.g., post-Althusserians such as Hindess and Hirst who argue that either determination is total in which case specificity is lost, or that recognition of autonomy precludes any specification. While this is fairly true on the level of the individual—there are so many determinations acting on one concrete person that you cannot use marxism to predict how they will act—it obscures the social. It denies the relevance of the cultural context which gives individuals options.

28. While it is accurate to argue against a simple materialist conception in which one's class automatically determines one's politics and ideology, that does not mean that we cannot specify determination of consciousness by class structure. At the same time, the nature of consciousness must be understood as fundamentally contradictory.

29. Society is a structured field in which class determinations produce patterns and correlations. We need to differentiate within and across class categories. Structures set parameters, determine the availability of cultural options and responses.

30. Repeat 29 for race/ethnicity, gender, age, etc.

31. It is not enough to simply analyze the text and its characteristics. We have to understand a text in relation to an audience at a particular

moment, in particular institutions, in the context of past experience and future possibilities.

32. The text must be considered in terms of the historical conditions of its production and consumption.

33. Individuals have different relations to sets of discourses in society. Their position in the social formation will determine which sets of discourses they are likely to encounter and how they will encounter them.

[Elaborate here with reference to Eco's model, some reference to Bruce Austin on film audience sociology, and a critique of Foucault's reactionary politics.]

*I find all this very powerful  
& original. Will this be incorporated  
into the essay met includes "Readers",  
the subtext, and "Comp. Kitzbuh..."  
There's a lot of related material in  
these sections.*